New Fiction

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the early sufferings of "Jane Eyre"—of course in modern guise. And there is a frankly acknowledged debt to the mournful Olive Schreiner. Indeed, one feels that something of the exasperatingly hopeless tone of the book is due to these influences. Perhaps the end of it holds out a promise, one to which Miss Hull should be held, of another book, to take poor Jean further upon her "quest" and let her have a bit more luck. That is not a silly demand for a "happy ending," but a plea for a broader view of possibilities.

The story is another arraignment of family life, with its patriarchal vestiges, and a demand for something better. It is also a continuation of the fictionists' clinic upon the peculiar case of the young person of the day. It is, however, not another diatribe upon changing customs and the license of the day; the theme is as old as human temper and marital infelicity and the incompetence of parents as parents, and might have been dated fifty years ago The villain of the piece is no one person, but a sort of giant misfit who bedevils all of the characters, chiefly the unhappy parents of the questing Jean. They quarrel, stridently—brawl, in fact—while the children listen shivering, or run out into the night and put their fingers in their ears. The mother appears to be the worst offender, but when Jean and her brother abandon the old folks to fight it out one comes to sympathize a little with her tantrums. There is also a series of unsatisfactory lovers, and a horrid episode of teaching at a country school, where the stench of rural vices comes to her knowledge. And we get a vision of her desultory study at college, "her eye screwed to the cold top of a microscope until the brass grew warm and pulled at her flesh. . . . She speculated. The Bible was a story. Darwin was truth. No one made the world. It was making itself. . . . Nothing done yet. In the making."

This girl at the microscope might have come out of one of H. G. Wells's books—which is a very good place for a young woman to come from. But one also feels that Miss Hull got her from the same source that Wells drew upon—experience and observation of the living model. Of course such a girl would have to throw off an ugly environment and unsatisfactory parents along with it. But it is very necessary that Miss Hull should go on and write that other book—when she is old enough to do so. For Jean's last word is, "I'm off now, away from all the old years, in quest of—what? Love, work, myself!"

GEORGE WOOD.

JOSEPH GREER AND HIS DAUGHTER. By Henry Kitchell Webster. Bobbs-Merrill Company.

MR. WEBSTER is perhaps the most expert technician among American novelists of the day. He understands the novel, and handles it with a sureness and an apparent ease that mark a master craftsman. His approach, too, differs from that of many successful writers, many of whom, nowadays, seem to start out with a definite thesis, a something to be proved, or a problem to be solved, a purpose either ethical or philosophical apart from the desire to tell a story. Mr. Webster's work has ethical and philosophic content, in full measure, but he is primarily interested in his story as a novel, a presentation of a cross section of life. He assumes no air of responsibility for his characters; he will not compel them to this or that, but lets them, as it seems, work things out for themselves. His method here is comparable to that of the older masters, Thackeray especially. Of course it is the most subtle form of art, in its apparent artlessness.

The thing that strikes one most about his people is that they are never echoes. They do not remind you of any one you have read about before. Each is new; just as each human being is a new entity in himself or herself; one of the infinite variations in the theme, but emphatically a variation. Mr. Webster's people are always exactly differentiated. They are not built up from any formula, but just seem to happen, each in his own way. That is more evident in this novel than in any of its predecessors; it indicates a growth in ability, a wider, surer vision.

The plot is twofold: the story of Joseph Greer, and of his daughter Beatrice upon lines that converge, and behind these is also a contrast between this pair and the more stolid mass of humanity against whom they are thrown out, as vivid pictures against a background. Joseph Greer is a brilliant inventor and engineer; he is aptly called "kinetic," the kind of man who makes things and makes them go, and is interested chiefly in that process rather than in ultimate results. The same traits crop up in his daughter, who is an explorer of life, a girl who *will* have her own way and who justifies herself by its success. It is impossible to summarize the plot, but it may be noted that she marries her chauffeur, lives happily, and ends as a "stunt" aviatrix, flying for the "movies."

Jo has become greatly interested in flax and its possibilities; he invents a marvelous machine for making linen, and is eventually robbed of it. That leads to the contrast between these "kinetic" people and the static, acquisitive sort, whom he contemptously calls the "stall fed." They are "soft, irresolute, kindly, gregarious . . . by tradition and temper collectors, harvesters, stowers away, and a man like Jo, who has no real interest in property beyond the dynamic use of it . . . stands little chance with them." Incidentally Jo experiments with alcohol, and falls in love with his antagonist's wife, and there is plenty of minor action and intrigue, through a cleverly built plot to a proper climax.

H. L. PANGBORN.

THE OPTIMIST. By E. M. Delafield. The Macmillan Company.

IT is no doubt difficult for those who have never lived in it to realize fully that the Victorian era is by no means wholly dead: that it survives not merely in certain remote backwaters, but still lives, here and there among the most modernly progressive folk, sometimes jostling elbows with them, but more often holding aloof. The term "Victorian" has been sadly overworked, but it is hard to think of a better one, and every one recognizes its connotations. In this novel, as in her earlier story, "Humbug," Mrs. Delafield is concerned with the contrasts and strains between the habits and beliefs of the fathers and those of their twentieth century children. In the other, and heavier, story she dissected the evils of the "suppressions" and humbugs of what passed for education; in this she goes deeper and treats of the fundamental philosophy of life and of religion in the contrasted eras. This is a vastly better book than its forerunner; kept looser and lighter in its movement with no less of dignity. And she does not here make the mistake of rendering her "Victorian" old man repellant or altogether fatuous. Instead, he is a real saint, splendid in his courage and truly noble, though he is also exasperating, and it is hard to be patient with his obsolete ideas.

Canon Morchard, aged sixty or so, a widower with five grown up children, is the invincible "optimist" of the title. He believes, deeply, that "all things work together for good," and so on, and his faith in traditional Christianity is unshaken. He is always emotional, even sentimental, and wholly sincere; a pre-Darwinian survival, and also a firm adherent of all the old conventionalities. His oldest son, David, has broken away and is a soldier in India, but his three daughters and his youngest son are still living at home when the story opens, just after the war. To them comes Owen Quentillian, a former pupil of the Canon and once an inmate of his family. Owen is the embodiment of hard modernism, disillusioned, determined to face facts and refusing to deceive himself with sentimentalities. He is a counter type to the old Canon, but there is no open conflict between them. Owen judges him, and understands, but, like the Canon's own children, he recognizes the true nobility of him. "No one could hurt father." The children, each in his or her own way, are dominated by that feeling.

And, as one of the girls puts it, "Father has sheltered us from everything, in the most beautiful ways." Even from ideas and growth and freedom. Of course revolt comes, in each case, in one way or another, except in that of the eldest daughter, Lucilla, who maintains her "sacrifice" to the last, and is then rewarded, somewhat surprisingly—as if the author felt that she simply had to atone, somehow, to poor Lucilla. All the characters are carefully and vivaciously drawn and accurately distinguished. They are people, not mere types. It is a penetrating, skillfully conducted analysis, woven into a smoothly moving plot with enough action to carry it. The book shows a very striking gain in technique over "Humbug" and is important enough to place Mrs. Delafield in a prominent position among the newer British women writers.

ONCE UPON A TIME. By A. A. Milne. G. P. Putnam's Sons.

MR. MILNE'S latest almost belongs on a shelf by itself—but not quite. We shall have to place it beside "The Rose and the Ring" and "Alice," though the first part of it is something really different to either of these. But there is no better company for such a book than that; that delectable shelf is all too scantily furnished, and there is plenty of room there—as much as there always was at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. And there are very, very few candidates really fit to join that entertainment. Once more Mr. Milne is genuinely a public benefactor.

He carefully explains that this "is not a children's book . . . I wrote it for grown-ups. . . . For it is a Fairy Story for grown-ups because I have tried to give some character to the people who wander through its pages." The idea is to take genuinely human people and put them through the good old plots and adventures of the fairy tales—with a difference. The King of Barodia acquires a pair of Seven League Boots, but he uses them as a serious minded adult might. The other monarch, King Merriwig of Euralia, has gotten himself into a mess by promising the hand of the Princess Hyacinth and half of his kingdom to no less than seven different princes who are engaged upon seven different enterprises. The experimenting King of Barodia commits the indiscretion of hopping, eighteen times, over the breakfast table of the other Majesty, which naturally led to conflict. And there was a terribly fascinating Countess Belvane, who was resolved to be wicked, and wanted to marry the King.

That is quite enough to start things and the reader can readily foresee the joyous tangle of adventure that is possible. It is Hans Andersen without any pathos or moralizing, but as the tale goes on it tends more and more toward "Alice." At first the people remain just what he means them to be, but ultimately the fairies are a bit too much for them, and most of them turn into strange, fascinating beings, who are not quite humans and not quite Fabulous Monsters. But for the most part they have as much solidity as (for comparison) the royalties of "The Rose and the Ring," though at any moment they may turn into something else. They remain less conventionally wicked than the ogres of Thackeray's tale and have none of the primitive savagery of Grimm or the real old folk legend.

It is—for those sufficiently intelligent to follow it—one of the most charmingly entertaining divigations from the commonplace of recent years. Mr. Milne has no solemn purpose, no ax to grind and does not care a bit for anything but the pure joy of telling a story. And such a book is a treasure nowadays.

ALIEN SOULS. By Achmed Abdullah. The James A. McCann Company.

ACHMED ABDULLAH has endeavored to add a few chapters to the "Arabian Nights." "Alien Souls" is a collection of his best short stories in which the swiftly changing scene takes the reader from China across the wastes of Afghanistan, through Persia and Arabia, into Turkey and Macedonia, finally to reach a climax in the squalor of New York's Chinatown. The author does well with his tales. First of all, he knows the East and into his narrative he injects the soft, subtle charm of an ever mysterious Orient. He knows his metier and touches, here and there, a really vibrant chord.

"Black Poppies" is the best of the lot. Here he weaves his atmosphere so wistfully through the haze of opium smoke which obscures the scene that the reader fails to realize until the conclusion that Yung Han-Rai is lying upon the hard, wooden bunk of his dirty Chinatown home instead of in the luxury of aristocratic, ancestral halls in his native land. In The Two-Handed Sword," a tale of the honor of a Japanese "samurai" in Germany at the outbreak of the war, it is a question of honor, and the author carries his point with

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